

BEARS' GUIDE

Published by
C & B PUBLISHING

WHAT NONTRADITIONAL EDUCATION IS ALL ABOUT

In times of great change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped for a world that no longer exists.

MICHAEL PORTER

The man on the telephone was so distraught, he was almost in tears. For more than 20 years, he had been in charge of sawing off dead tree branches for a large Midwestern city. But a new personnel policy in that city decreed that henceforth, all department heads would have to have Bachelor's degrees. If this man could not earn a degree within two years, he would no longer be permitted to continue in the job he had been performing satisfactorily for over two decades.

It is an unfortunate but very real aspect of life today that a college or university degree is often more important (or at least more useful) than a good education or substantial knowledge, in your field, whether that field involves nuclear physics or sawing off branches. It doesn't matter if you've been reading, studying, and learning all your life. It doesn't matter how good you are at what you do. In many situations, if you don't have a piece of (usually imitation) parchment that certifies you as a Bachelor, Master, or Doctor, you are perceived as somehow less worthy, and are often denied the better jobs and higher salaries that go to degree-holders.

In fact, as more and more degree-holders, from space scientists to philosophers are unable to find employment in their specific chosen fields and move elsewhere in the job market, degrees become more important than ever. Consider, for instance, a job opening for a high-school English teacher. Five applicants with comparable skills apply, but one has a Doctorate while the other four have Bachelor's degrees. Who do you think would probably get the job?

Never mind that you don't need a Ph.D. to teach high-school English any more than you need a B.A. to chop down trees. The simple fact is that degrees are extremely valuable commodities in the job market.

Happily, as the need for degrees increases, availability has kept pace. Since the mid 1970s, there has been a virtual explosion in what is now commonly called "alternative" or "nontraditional" and "external" or "off-campus" education—ways and means of getting an education or a degree (or both, if you wish) without sitting in classrooms day after day, year after year.

The rallying cry was, in fact, sounded in 1973 by Ewald B. Nyquist, then president of the wonderfully innovative University of the State of New York. He said:

There are thousands of people . . . who contribute in important ways to the life of the communities in which they live, even though they do not have a college degree. Through native intelligence, hard work and sacrifice, many have gained in knowledge and understanding. And yet, the social and economic advancement of these people has been thwarted in part by the emphasis that is put on the possession of credentials...As long as we remain a strongly credentialed society...employers will not be disposed to hire people on the basis of what they know, rather than on what degrees and diplomas they hold. If attendance at a college is the only road to these credentials, those who cannot or have not availed themselves of this route but have acquired knowledge and skills through other sources, will be denied the recognition and advancement to which they are entitled. Such inequity should not be tolerated.

Nontraditional education takes many forms, including the following:

- credit (and degrees) for life-experience learning, even if the learning took place long before you entered school;
- credit (and degrees) for passing examinations;
- credit (and degrees) for independent study, whether or not you were enrolled in a school at the time;
- credit (and degrees) through intensive study (for instance, 10 hours a day for a month instead of one hour a day for a year);
- credit (and degrees) through guided private study at your own pace, from your own home or office, under the supervision of a faculty member with whom you communicate on a regular basis;
- credit (and degrees) for work done on your home or office computer, linked to your school's computer, wherever in the world it may be;
- credit (and degrees) from weekend schools, evening schools, and summer-only schools;
- credit (and degrees) entirely by correspondence;
- credit (and degrees) through the use of audio- and videotaped courses that you can review at your convenience.

Perhaps the best way to make clear, in a short space, the differences between the traditional (dare one say old-fashioned) approaches to education and degrees and the nontraditional (or modern) approach is to offer the following dozen comparisons:

Traditional education awards degrees on the basis of time served and credit earned.

Nontraditional education awards degrees on the basis of competencies and performance skills.

Traditional education bases degree requirements on a medieval formula that calls for some generalized education and some specialized education.

Nontraditional education bases degree requirements on an agreement between the student and the faculty, aimed at helping the student achieve his or her career, personal, or professional goals.

Traditional education awards the degree when the student has taken the required number of credits in the required order.

Nontraditional education awards the degree when the student's actual work and learning reach certain previously agreed-upon levels.

Traditional education considers the years from age 18 to age 22 the appropriate time to earn a first degree.

Nontraditional education assumes learning is desirable at any age, and that degrees should be available to people of all ages.

Traditional education considers the classroom to be the primary source of information and the campus the center of learning.

Nontraditional education believes that some sort of learning can and does occur in any part of the world.

Traditional education believes that printed texts should be the principal learning resource.

Nontraditional education believes the range of learning resources is limitless, from the daily newspaper to personal interviews; from videotapes to computers to world travel.

Traditional faculty must have appropriate credentials and degrees.

Nontraditional faculty are selected for competency and personal qualities in *addition* to credentials and degrees.

Traditional credits and degrees are based primarily on

mastery of course content.

Nontraditional credits and degrees add a consideration of learning *how to learn*, and the integration of diverse fields of knowledge.

Traditional education cultivates dependence on authority through prescribed curricula, required campus residence, and required classes.

Nontraditional education cultivates self-direction and independence through planned independent study, both on and off campus.

Traditional curricula are generally oriented toward traditional disciplines and well-established professions.

Nontraditional curricula reflect a range of individual students' needs and goals, and are likely to be problem-oriented, issue-oriented, and world-oriented.

Traditional education aims at producing finished products—students who are done with their education and ready for the job market.

Nontraditional education aims at producing lifelong learners, capable of responding to their own evolving needs and those of society over an entire lifetime.

Traditional education, to adapt the old saying, gives you a fish and feeds you for a day.

Nontraditional education teaches you how to fish, and feeds you for life.

Traditional education had nothing to offer the dead-tree-limb expert.

Nontraditional education made it possible for him to complete a good Bachelor's degree in less than a year, entirely by correspondence and at a modest cost. His job is now secure.